

PART II

THEORY, HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY: THE PRIMACY OF THE POLITICAL

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Raymond Aron spent his life defending “liberal democracy.” What is the status of liberal democracy and the study of it today? Any “casual look” shows a close relationship between authoritarian and poor countries, on the one hand, and democratic regimes and rich countries, on the other. This question has been part of the research agenda since at least 1960, when Lipset¹ questioned the relationship between democracy and development. Empirical research distinguishes two “causal mechanisms” in order to explain the correlation: democracies emerge in economically developing dictatorships either by an “endogenous” process or for other “exogenous” reasons, but they survive longer in developed countries and so there is an accumulation of democratic regimes in these countries. The first mechanism assumes that dictatorships die when countries ruled by them develop because such countries can no longer be governed effectively by command or because—more crudely stated—the political systems there are determined by economic factors. This is a mechanism consistent with modernization theory: there is one general process, which begins with industrialization and urbanization, goes through education and mass communication, and culminates in social and political mobilization and democratization. Adam Przeworski summarizes thus: GDP per capita is the most suitable indicator predicting the type of regime.² If so, China will be democratic when it develops. A second type of mechanism was also ambiguously suggested by Lipset,³ but has only recently been explored. It is based on the assumption that if democracies emerge randomly during the development stage, they are more likely to survive in a rich country, and there is also a cumulative effect of monotonic convergence,⁴ which is also consistent with the correlation between the two factors. This second hypothesis is consistent with the role of human freedom in history. Men make democracies emerge and the environment is responsible only for allowing

them to survive, and so the level of development seems to have an explanatory power for the survival of democracies.⁵

And yet the discovery that in some countries dictatorships survive development and in others democracies flourish against all odds has led researchers to conclude that there is no single explanation. Despite these *negative lessons*, which compel us to weaken the correlations, we are still reluctant to admit the historical diversity implicit in the object of our research. One of the presuppositions of the type of data-handling common today in empirical political science is that what we are discussing are unvarying phenomena (democracy, development), and that these maintain constant relationships with each other that are capable of appearing in correlation. Democracy is therefore always the same old phenomenon that we have seen spread, to some extent, across the globe over the last century. Moreover, it is supposed that there are constant relationships between the sectors of reality, the economic and political system, religion, and so on, even when the sociological regularities detected do not appear timeless.

In Raymond Aron, we encounter a respect for, and a persistent desire to tackle head-on, the irreducible plurality of causes complicating the world we inhabit. The tendencies he observes are never declared to be laws, and so we never find him prophesying the “end of history” or the “victory of the market.” In our exuberance to push ahead mercilessly in search of irrefutable scientific explanations for change, we occasionally forget that the conditions for change are themselves susceptible to change, and sometimes very rapid change. The web of causality is complex, and democracy comes in many different forms, for many different reasons. Nevertheless, for all of its numerous variations throughout history, democracy retains certain core features and principles. Part of Aron’s project on industrial society was to investigate what is essential and what is variable in democracy or the *constitutional-pluralist regime*, as he preferred to call it.

Perrine Simon-Nahum’s chapter traces the evolution of Aron’s philosophy of history over the course of his lifetime. We are privy to the early intellectual considerations of the young French philosopher in the 1930s and how he shaped even his sociological approach around his ongoing engagement with determining man’s understanding of and role in history.

Giulio De Ligio’s chapter on “The Question of Political Regime and the Problems of Democracy” situates Aron’s political insights in the French liberal school of Montesquieu and Tocqueville. What these thinkers did was to take the importance of a sociological approach into account while at the same time never losing sight of the decisive influence of the political sphere on society—that is, the primacy of the political. De Ligio places Aron within this venerable tradition and also establishes a continuity between him and the ancient Greeks.

Daniel Mahoney’s chapter examines Aron’s defense of the constitutional-pluralist regime in the face of totalitarianism in both its Nazi and Soviet forms. Aron’s later work suggests that the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union might not have been an aberration from Marx’s ideas, but in fact a necessary consequence of them, for those ideas try to remake the human condition. In this light, Aron’s arguments against totalitarianism constitute a defense, not only of constitutional-pluralist regimes, but also of humanity.

Serge Audier encourages us to examine Aron's conception of constitutional-pluralist regimes through the lens of Machiavelli, whose works aided Aron in understanding both the totalitarian and the constitutional-pluralist regimes of his epoch. As regards the latter, the relevant and perhaps shocking insight—no more in Aron's time than in Machiavelli's own time—is that constitutional-pluralist regimes thrive on conflict.

Serge Paugam revisits Aron's course on class struggle, using it as a starting point for conceptualizing class relations in our time, by updating Aron's research in three areas that Aron himself considered worthy of analysis: the increasing heterogeneity of the working class, the transformation of social conflicts, and the problem of persistent poverty in wealthy societies.

A question that has assumed greater importance today is whether increasing government intervention in the economy will set us on the "road to serfdom." Although Aron sympathized with Hayek's defense of liberty, he was never able to embrace the unfettered free market as warmly as Hayek did. Iain Stewart illustrates Aron's middle-ground approach by setting Aron's economic views within the context of the debates occurring in France at the time, thereby suggesting that we might come to a better understanding of Aron's "cold war liberalism" if we see this as a continuation of the attempts to revise liberal economic theory during the Great Depression.

Notes

1. Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, New York, Doubleday, 1960, 27–65.
2. Adam Przeworski, Michel Alvarez, José António Cheibub, and Fernando Limogi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well Being in the World, 1950–1999*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 78, 111; 87–89, on the indicators 79 and 88; David L. Epstein, Robert Bates, Jack Goldstone, Ida Kristiansen, and Sharyn O'Halloran, "Democratic Transitions," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 50, no. 3, July 2006, Appendix, 26–27. Cf. also Samuel Huntington, "Vinte anos depois: o futuro da terceira vaga," in AAVV, *A invenção da democracia*, Lisboa, Fundação Mário Soares—ICS, 2000, 20.
3. Lipset, *Political Man*, 29 and 61, also suggests that democracy can be a cause (facilitator) of economic development.
4. Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, and Limogi, *Democracy and Development*, 90.
5. Not only life expectancy arises from 8 to 18 years with a GDP per capita greater than \$1,000, but if it is greater than \$6,000 then we have a miracle: no democracy ever returns to a dictatorship. Robert Dahl, while denying that there was a linear tendency, nevertheless established one at a GDP per capita of \$800 in 1957. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy. Participation and Opposition*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1971, 67–68.